

**Testimony of Jason Kamras, District of Columbia Public School Teacher and 2005
National Teacher of the Year, Before the House Committee on Government Reform
(5-20-05)**

Chairman Davis, I would like to first thank you for the opportunity to speak before the Committee this morning.

Let me begin by saying that I am extraordinarily proud to be a District of Columbia Public School teacher. My colleagues in the District are incredibly dedicated and inspiring professionals who share their creativity, intellect, and love with children of all ages, each and every day. There is simply no group of people I would be prouder to represent.

I would also like to take this opportunity to share with the Committee how honored I am to have the opportunity to work with the children of the District of Columbia. I am privileged to have two of my former students with me this morning: Ta-Sha Watkins, a 9th grader at Banneker Senior High School, and Marco Jeter, a 9th grader at Cesar Chavez Public Charter School.

I had the distinct pleasure of working with these two amazing young adults as their 7th and 8th grade math teacher. They also participated in a digital photography program that I direct at Sousa. Like all of my students, they are incredibly bright, creative, caring, and inspiring. *They* are the District of Columbia Public Schools.

I would also like to recognize Ta-sha's mother, Ms. Johnson, and Marco's mother, Ms. Jeter. Like every parent I have ever encountered in my 8 years in the classroom, they are deeply and passionately committed to the success of their children. We have collaborated as educational partners, and I look forward to continuing our work together for years to come.

I have been asked by this Committee to comment on the factors that led me to teach in the District. There are many, but I believe the story of my path here actually begins in Sacramento, California, my childhood home. It was there that I served as a VISTA volunteer during the summer after my sophomore year in college. I supported the work of a local public school teacher who was implementing a summer enrichment program for the children of a low-income housing complex.

That was a formative summer for me as I learned some very important truths about myself that would shape the rest of my life. First, I learned that I love working with children. I was immediately captivated by my students' curiosity, creativity, insightfulness, humor, and resilience. I also learned that I love the work of teaching. I was delighted to be reading stories, manipulating tangrams, and mixing plaster of Paris.

But that summer also taught me something much broader. It provided me with a firsthand understanding of the inequities in our public education system.

I found that the reading and math skills of many of the children with whom I had the pleasure of working that summer were significantly below grade level.

It was not that my students lacked ability. On the contrary, they were extraordinarily bright. Rather, because they lived in a community with few resources and great challenges, the educational playing field was unjustly tilted against them.

Sadly, this is the case for millions of American children in low-income communities across the nation. In my view, this inequity is the greatest injustice facing our nation today, and it is at the core of why I teach.

With the summer fresh in my mind, I returned to Princeton University in the fall of 1993 focused on education. As graduation approached, I learned about a program called Teach for America. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this program, let me take a moment to describe it for you. Founded by Wendy Kopp, also a Princeton alumnus, nearly 15 years ago, Teach for America is a national organization dedicated to eliminating inequity in our public schools. Specifically, the program recruits, trains, and supports highly motivated college graduates to teach in underserved urban and rural public school districts and become lifelong leaders in the effort to close the achievement gap.

Teach for America's focus on equity and its rigorous training and support immediately attracted me. I applied, and in the fall of 1996, was accepted into the program and

assigned to the Washington, DC region. In the fall of 1996, I was hired as a 6th grade mathematics teacher at John Philip Sousa Middle School in Southeast Washington. Save for one year at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I have been there ever since.

Like many urban schools, Sousa faces a number of socioeconomic challenges. But these challenges do not define the school. For me, Sousa is Marco, Ta-sha, and the hundreds of other extraordinary children who enter its doors each morning. They are why I love my job and why I am so proud to be a teacher here in the District.

Despite the challenges that Sousa faces, my students are achieving. As evidence of this, let me share with you the results of a mathematics initiative that I recently developed and implemented at my school. Through this initiative, we doubled the amount of instructional time allocated for math instruction, redesigned our curriculum to emphasize a “real-world” context for all concepts, and greatly expanded the use of technology in the classroom. When I piloted this new program with one of my colleagues, the percentage of students scoring “Below Basic,” indicating “little or no mastery of subject matter,” on our district standardized assessment fell from approximately 80 percent to 40 percent *in just one year*. This was the largest drop in the Below Basic percentage that the school had ever seen. I am now working to expand this program to the entire school.

In an effort to replicate and expand our success, and in an effort to answer this Committee’s request for insights into how we can ensure high levels of achievement for

all District children, I have reflected a great deal on our program. I have identified five key factors that I believe were most critical to our success.

The first of these was the quality and dedication of the teachers involved in the program's implementation. We created much of our own course material, strategically designed our lesson plans, and worked 14 hour days, tutoring before and after school, and on weekends. We were—and we continue to be—absolutely driven. If we are to reach new heights of achievement in the District, we, as teachers, must be relentless in our pursuit of excellence.

We must also ensure that we have a steady pipeline of first-rate educators *entering* the school system. We can achieve this by recruiting aggressively, by continuing to streamline our hiring practices, and by offering financial incentives to make it more feasible for educators to live in the metropolitan Washington region. In addition, we must redouble our efforts to *retain* high quality educators. To do so, we must ensure that working conditions continue to improve and we must make certain that our teachers have the opportunity to participate in robust, sustained, and job-embedded professional development.

The second factor that was critical to our success was effective school leadership. My principal was immediately receptive to my ideas about revamping the math curriculum and was extraordinarily supportive during the implementation process. He did not feel the need to dictate. Rather, he trusted me to be an instructional innovator. This freedom,

combined with support, was integral to our success. Effective school management empowers a faculty to overcome so many of the challenges it may face. We must ensure that the District redoubles its efforts to attract and retain dynamic school leaders who love instruction, who manage collaboratively, and who are instinctive problem-solvers.

The third factor was our outreach to parents and guardians. We made a concerted and sustained effort to involve our children's families every step of the way. As a result, we were able to develop a collaborative educational environment that enveloped our students twenty-four hours a day. As our school system moves forward, we must do more to support and engage parents and guardians who are, after all, the front line of education.

The fourth factor was an increase in technology resources. In specific, through grant-writing, I was able to acquire a mini-computer lab, an LCD projector, a document projector, and digital cameras. These technologies revolutionized my teaching. They allowed me to more effectively meet individual learning needs and significantly increase student motivation and engagement. As a system, we must make greater investments in instructional technology and in the training necessary for its effective use. I guarantee that such investments will result in dramatic achievement gains.

The fifth and most important factor is less tangible. It was an unyielding belief that each and every child had the capacity to achieve at the highest levels combined with the expectation that they would do so. I simply cannot overstate how important this was—and continues to be—to my success in the classroom. When we, as adults, set the highest of

standards for our children, we send the message that we care deeply about them. Students inevitably rise to the occasion. I can attest to this personally. I have had countless former students tell me how much they appreciated the high bar that I set for them in the 7th and 8th grades. They tell me how that motivated them to achieve and how they are now in advanced math classes because they have outperformed their peers. As a city, we must be united in believing, *without question*, in our children's inherent capacity for greatness and we must continue to set the highest of expectations for them.

Excellent teachers, effective school leaders, sustained parent-teacher collaborations, increased instructional technology, and high expectations *will* result in greater achievement even in so-called disadvantaged districts. I can attest to this personally. We owe it to our children to provide these elements at each and every school.

Let me close by saying once more how proud I am to be a public school teacher in the District of Columbia. I believe deeply in our system and I will continue to work tirelessly on its behalf. Its greatness lies within its students, extraordinary young people like Ta-sha and Marco. Let us continue to be undaunted in our pursuit of excellence so that *all* children in the District will have the opportunity to pursue their dreams.

Thank you.